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ABSTRACT

Developed for fifth graders studying United States history, this lesson addresses the following National Council for the Social Studies thematic strands: Time, Continuity, and Change; People, Places, and Environments; Individual Development and Identity; Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Power, Authority, and Governance; Production, Distribution, and Consumption; and Civic Ideals and Practices. The lesson is divided into three sections: engagement, investigation, and explain and clarify. The lesson suggests activities for each section, including the small-group creation of a homestead diorama. (BT)

Achieving Equity on the Great Plains: Women's Rights and the Homestead Act of 1862

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Achieving Equity on the Great Plains: Women's Rights and the Homestead Act of 1862

Developed for fifth graders studying United States history, the following NCSS thematic strands are addressed in this lesson:

- II. Time, Continuity, and Change:
 - identify and use various sources for reconstructing the past.
- III. People, Places, and Environments:
 - describe how people create places that reflect ideas, culture, personality, and wants and needs as they design homes.
- IV. Individual Development and Identity:
 - analyze a particular event to identify reasons individuals might respond to it in different ways.
- V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions:
 - show how groups and institutions function to meet individual needs and promote a common good, even as an unintended consequence.
- VI. Power, Authority, and Governance:
 - recognize and provide examples of the concepts of fairness, equity, and social justice.
- VII. Production, Distribution, and Consumption:
 - identify examples of private and public goods and services.
- X. Civic Ideals and Practices:
 - explain how public policies and citizen behaviors may or may not reflect the stated ideals of a democratic form of government.

LESSON PROCEDURES

ENGAGEMENT: Inform students that a proposal has been made at their school to "ban" or stop all the girls from riding their bicycles to school; a vote is pending, however, it is school district "policy" or law that only boys may vote.

Discussion - Do you think this proposal is fair and just, that it represents equal treatment and is in the interests of all students? Why or why not? Girls, how does this make you feel? Can any of you think of a time in your life when you felt that you had been treated unfairly?

Historical Background: Prior to 1862 it was nearly impossible for middle or lower class women to acquire land in the United States because they had few chances for employment and, therefore, they were unable to save enough money to purchase land. Women were also forbidden, by law or by custom, to work at many of the same kinds of jobs that men did. Prevailing material and social relations effectively prevented women from accumulating wealth, capital, power, and prestige. By virtue of the Homestead Act of 1862, however, many unmarried, widowed, and divorced women were able to claim land as the heads of households:

What was the Homestead Act? In 1862 the United States government signed into law the provision that anyone who was the head of a family, 21 years of age, a veteran of the U.S. armed forces, a citizen -- or someone who intended on becoming a citizen -- may acquire 160 acres (1/4 section) of land in the public domain for a fee of \$10. To acquire permanent title and ownership of the land, however, a homesteader had to live on and "improve" the land for five years, at which

time she or he would be called upon to "prove up" or show a government representative how the land had been improved over the last five years.

Many politicians viewed the Homestead Act as a good way for the government to ease overcrowding in the East and provide would-be farmers with cheap land to grow crops. This, in turn, would stimulate the entire economy and help settle a sparsely populated area of the United States known as the Great Plains (show students the Great Plains on a U.S. map along with pictures of homesteads).

INVESTIGATION: To give students an idea of the material conditions and social relations of a woman homesteader, read or tell the life story of Adeline Hornbek ("Teaching with Historic Places," 1999, Jackdaw Publications, Field Trip HP-67). Examine maps and photographs of homesteads along with books and/or primary sources that tell about people's homesteading experiences. Distribute a copy of the "Homestead Proof - Testimony of Claimant" document to analyze and tell students that for the next week they will be creating a homesteading project allowing them to fill out their Homestead Proof and prove up to the class.

Creating a Homestead Diorama: For one week, conduct whole-class investigations on a daily basis to learn how a homesteader might improve the land, make money, and eventually satisfy the requirements necessary to obtain legal title to his or her 160 acres (a graphic organizer could be used to keep track of potential improvements and the sources of historical evidence that were consulted).

At the end of each day's investigation, students work together in small groups to construct and continually develop a homestead diorama. A diorama is a miniature scene, wholly or partially three-dimensional, depicting figures and material culture in an authentic historical setting. Group members collaborate in making decisions about what "improvements" they should make and how to replicate these improvements on their diorama. Five years on a homestead could be represented by five whole-class investigations and small-group meetings to create the dioramas.

Daily Lesson Closure: To ensure individual learning and accountability, each group member keeps a journal in which he or she describes, explains, and reflects on the improvements made to their homestead for each of the five years = five journal entries. For example, students might describe how they chose the location or site for their homestead - this would provide be a nice opportunity to integrate one or more of the five themes of geography, map skills, and writing a journal in the first person to encourage a sense of historical empathy. As a capstone experience to the completed diorama, the group fills out its own Homestead Proof.

EXPLAIN AND CLARIFY: Each group presents their diorama to the class and describes their homestead's location, explains why that particular place was chosen, the kinds of improvements that were made to and on the land, such as the crops grown, animals raised, buildings and enclosures constructed, businesses started, irrigation projects, additions to the main house, food eaten and what kinds of neighbors and entertainment homesteaders enjoyed. Describe what the homestead looked like and included when first settled by reading aloud some journal entries or excerpts from year one, two, three, and so on to give students an appreciation for change over time and human / environment interactions. These group presentations can represent the "proving up" process by displaying their completed Homestead Proofs on an overhead transparency for class approval to obtain permanent title to the land.

STUDENT AND TEACHER RESOURCES

How Would You Survive in the American West? (1997) By Jacqueline Morley and David Antram. New York: Salariya Book Co., ISBN 0-531-15308-8.

Rough and Ready Homesteaders. (1994) By A.S. Gintzler. Santa Fe, NM: John Muir Publications, ISBN 1-56261-154-2.

Prairie Visions: The Life and Times of Solomon Butcher. (1994) By Pam Conrad. Harper Trophy Books, ISBN 0-06-446135-1.

Children of the Wild West. (1983) By Russell Freedman. Clarion Books, ISBN 0-395-54785-7.

Daily Life in a Covered Wagon. (1994) By Paul Erikson. The Preservation Press, ISBN 0-89133-245-6.

HOMESTEAD PROOF - TESTIMONY OF CLAIMANT

I _____ being called as a witness in his or her own behalf in support of homestead entry No. _____, for the location _____ testify as follows:

Question 1. What is your name - written in full and correctly spelled - your age, and address?

Answer:

Question 2. Are you a native of the United States, or have you been naturalized?

Answer:

Question 3. When was your house built on the land and when did you establish actual residence therein? (Describe said house and other improvements which you have placed on the land, giving total value thereof.)

Answer:

Question 4. Of whom does your family consist; and have you and your family resided continuously on the land since first establishing residence thereon? (If unmarried, state the fact.)

Answer:

Question 5. For what period or periods have you been absent from the homestead since making settlement, and for what purposes; and if temporarily absent, did your family reside upon and cultivate the land during such absence?

Answer:

Question 6. How much of the land have you cultivated and for how many seasons have you raised crops thereon?

Answer:

Question 7. Are there any indications of coal or minerals of any kind on the land? (If so, describe what they are, and state whether the land is more valuable for agricultural than for mineral purposes.)

Answer:

Question 8. Have you ever mad any other homestead entry? (If so, describe the same.)

Answer:

Question 9. Have you sold, conveyed, or mortgaged any portion of the land; and if so, to whom and for what purpose?

Answer:

I hereby certify that the foregoing testimony was read to the claimant before being subscribed, and was sworn to before me this _____ day of _____, 188__.

Signature of Homesteader: _____

Signature of Government Representative: _____